

Caregiver Connection

November 2010

A monthly publication for Washington state foster and adoptive families and relative caregivers.
WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AND HEALTH SERVICES, CHILDREN'S ADMINISTRATION

National Adoption Month

For more than 800 children in Washington state during the past 10 years, the third Friday in November has been the day they find their forever homes.

That's because the third Friday is the day chosen by Washington as Adoption Day, part of National Adoption Month. In Washington, Adoption Day is a team effort coordinated by the state Administrator for the Courts and supported by Children's Administration. This year, Adoption Day is November 19.

National Adoption Month is coordinated by AdoptUSKids, Child Welfare Information Gateway and the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

Last year, more than 200 Washington state adoptions occurred during National Adoption Month. That's part of the more than 1,500 adoptions from the foster care system that occur annually in Washington.

"The month of November has a greater focus than the other 11 months because the community really steps up to help," said Pam Kramer, adoption program manager for Children's Administration.

In addition to the court hearings held in the 16 counties where adoptions are finalized on Adoption Day, communities often have receptions and other events to celebrate the significant milestone in the lives of the children who are adopted. The organization Free Cakes For Kids, for example, provides cakes for the celebrations.

Children's Administration places a premium on finding permanent homes for children who come into care. Many children are able to reunify with families or live with relatives. But for many others, adoptive homes provide the stable future all children deserve.

Anyone interested in learning more about adoptions should contact 1-888-KIDS-414 or contact your local Children's Administration office.

For further information on National Adoption Day events, please contact your local Children's Administration office.



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Meet the Willis family

Most children find safety and comfort in the arms and care of their family, including grandparents and other relatives.

Those would include the children cared for by Shelly and Tony Willis of Olympia. Beginning in the late 1980s they have given meaning to the term “we are family” – like the 2 million other relative caregivers in the United States. Often, when relative caregiving is discussed, people think of grandparents raising grandchildren. But it is much broader than that.

Shelly and Tony’s journey began when a nephew came to live with them. Although they had no kids of their own, Shelly had a background in mental health and children’s mental health, so taking care of kids fit right in. Before long, their nephew’s best friend in the neighborhood began coming for meals and spending the night. Days turned into months and, as Shelly said, “we basically adopted this young man.”

Both kids were unable to be cared for by their biological parents so Shelly and Tony, took over long term care of them. Now, both 26, they have grown into fine successful young men.

Equal opportunity caregivers, they moved from boys to girls when they took in two nieces who are living with them now. One is 21; the other is 17. Both are named Elizabeth and one shares a birthday with Shelly.

Shelly and Tony got licensed to become foster parents, but never actually took in any kids from the foster care system. “It was like informal foster care,” Shelly said.

Not only have their lives revolved around raising these young people, Shelly became very active in helping parents and relatives find the support and resources they need to better equip them to care for children. Shelly says they make an interesting team.

Tony makes dentures, which has led them to joke that, “He makes people smile and I work with them when they cry.”

In 1996, Shelly started Family Support and Education Services. The mission: “to support and inspire healthy child development through the provision of quality child care services, education and family support programs.”

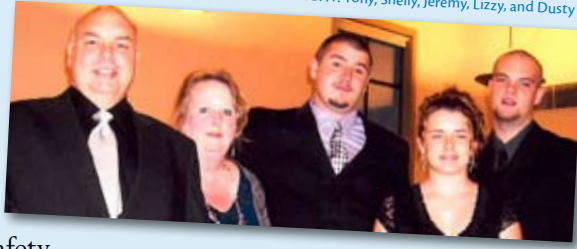
That translates into a variety of parenting classes, support groups and resources for relative caregivers, foster parents and families in Thurston, Lewis, Mason and Pierce counties. One of the classes, “Winning at Parenting” would probably well describe what their work is about.

Shelly annually coordinates the “Voices of Children” contest, in which children living with relatives are asked to submit words and/or pictures to describe what their relative caregivers have meant to them. In July of this year, Governor Gregoire honored the young winners and the caregivers at a ceremony in her office.

13-year-old Nubia of Seattle could be describing Shelly and Tony and other relative caregivers when she described her “aunty.”

“She’s someone who makes me happy when I’m sad and makes me glad when I’m mad. She makes me happy inside and out. She tells me it’s OK when to me it’s not. If she were your aunty you would say I’m smart. Anyone would want an aunty like this one.”

LEFT TO RIGHT: Tony, Shelly, Jeremy, Lizzy, and Dusty



What do children think about foster care?

From North Carolina’s
Practice Notes for Social Workers

This article reviews results from two studies focused on the biological/adoptive children of foster parents and foster children themselves. By understanding their positions, perhaps foster care placement breakdown can be avoided. This article looks at the perspectives of both biological children and foster children.

Biological Children

Denise Poland and Victor Groze based their 1993 study on literature which reported the reaction of biological children to foster children was often responsible for placement breakdown, specific placements being unsuccessful and for foster parents leaving the foster care program. Parents and their children were interviewed about their foster care experience to learn:

- how children were prepared for the placement of a foster child,
- what problems developed in the family, and
- What suggestions they had for other families planning to foster a child.

Both parents and children agreed the most difficult issue was sharing parental time between children and foster children. The average age of the children answering the questionnaire was 13 – one might assume older children would not be as concerned with parental attention; this appears to be a faulty assumption.

The children reported they needed more information on what it would be like to have a foster sibling in the home. Specifically, they did not feel prepared for the behavior problems many children brought to care. Some asked why the foster children didn’t live with their own families, showing a lack of understanding of why the foster child was in the home to begin with.

The issue of parental guidance and attention surfaced in the children’s comments. Children spent more time away from home after the foster child’s arrival and had more freedom to make their own decisions, since their parents were preoccupied with the foster child. Both parents and children noted that the experience had helped biological children appreciate their own homes more. Children reported they learned how to care for children younger than themselves and generally enjoying meeting and coming to care about children outside of their family. Some said they wanted to become foster parents themselves.

The report indicates biological/adoptive children living in a home with foster children will experience ambivalent feelings about the foster child’s presence. Offering pre-placement training prior to placement was suggested by both parents and their children, as well as allowing their children to meet with other children who have lived with foster siblings, to help understand feelings about the process.

You can too.

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Foster Children

Another sometimes silent voice in the foster care system is the foster child herself. In a 1995 article published in *Child Welfare*, Penny Ruff Johnson and colleagues describe interviews they conducted with 59 foster children about their feelings regarding foster care. All children were between 11 and 14 years of age and had been in placement between six months and two years. Many had stable placements, but a significant number had multiple placements.

For these children, the positives of foster care far outweighed the negatives. Very few reported serious problems in placement and almost all felt their foster parents were working hard to help them adjust to the placement. They saw both their neighborhoods and schools as superior in foster placement. Over half were involved in extracurricular activities in their school.

These foster children spoke poignantly of the role of their case worker. One child stated, "She saved my life by taking me out of my real home. I would've gotten killed there." Others expressed appreciation for the dramatic change in their lifestyles – some pointed to better food, more opportunities for earning money, and generally saying "everything is better."

In spite of these positive reports, all children missed their biological parents and siblings. In addition, they reported missing their old friends more than anyone else. Generally, these children saw their parents as needing a combination of material goods and temperamental changes before they could return home. Two children's statements regarding what they would like to say to their biological parents are particularly telling: "Don't get in trouble or get hurt. Don't talk to strangers. Don't take drugs," and "A child needs someone to raise them, someone to take care of them." Children also had a few suggestions for case workers – be on time for visits, know how to talk and listen to kids, and plan parental visits.

Another area of concern to these children was the way they were taken into care. Many described being removed from school with police officers and case workers present. This was highly embarrassing to them and they felt that they were the ones who had done something wrong. One child remembered, "It seemed like we were going to jail." The children were also embarrassed when police officers and case workers descended upon their home. While many agreed that the state sometimes needs to intervene in families on behalf of children, they were deeply troubled by the way this was done.

Holiday giving for kids in care

Local community programs are already gearing up for the 2010 holiday season. CA receives requests this time of year from many of these programs who want to provide support at the holidays to children with open CA cases, thanks to the generous giving of our community partners. If you have a child with an open CA case in care in your home, this child may be eligible for referral by CA to one of these programs. (Note: individual community programs may have various eligibility criteria for participation, and not all children with open CA cases qualify for referral to a program.)

If you have not yet received information from CA about registering a child in your care for one of these holiday gift programs, or if you have questions about the child's eligibility for referral to a holiday gift program, please contact the child's social worker as soon as possible.



Adoption tax credit is now refundable

The health care reform bill made the federal adoption tax credit refundable as of 2010 – meaning adoptive families can benefit from the credit even if they do not have tax liability. This change makes the credit much more accessible to lower and moderate income families. Last week the IRS released guidance stating that adoption tax credit amounts carried forward from previous years are also refundable, so even parents who adopted as long ago as 2005 can benefit from the new law. If parents claimed the credit on their tax return for adoptions from 2005 to 2009 and have been carrying it forward on each return, with their 2010 taxes they can be paid for any remaining amount of the credit that they have not yet received. Parents who didn't file for the credit originally will need to amend past tax returns.

If you have questions, email adoption.assistance@nacac.org.

– From North American Council on Adoptable Children

Regional Contacts

Region 1 – Spokane

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Region 6 – Tumwater

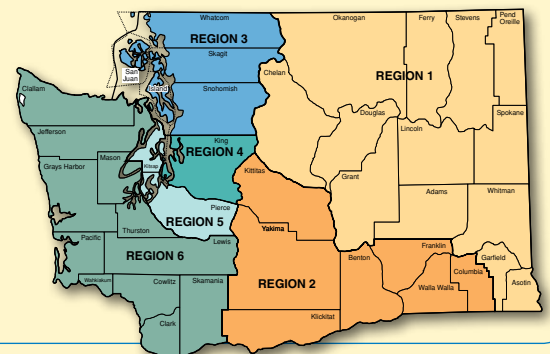
Cheryl Barrett 360-725-6758
Kim Mower 360-725-6778

Headquarters – Olympia

Lonnie Locke 360-902-7932

Toll free number: 1-800-562-5682

(listen carefully to the recorded message)



Important numbers to know when you take care of children in out-of-home care

Foster Parent and Caregiver Crisis and Support Line: 1-800-301-1868

ON-GOING AND CRISIS SUPPORTS FOR FOSTER PARENTS

Under contracts with the state, three private agencies are working to build supports for you within the foster care community. Supports include hubs, support groups, and matching new foster parents with veteran foster parents. To get connected:

- If you live in Eastern Washington, the Olympic Peninsula down through Pacific County or from Thurston County to Clark County, call 1-888-794-1794.
- If you live in King County or any counties north of King County, call 206-605-0664.
- If you live in Pierce or Kitsap counties, call 253-473-9252.
- If you live in King County, the Friends of Youth CARE program provides short-term counseling, education and support to help you care for your most difficult children. 1-888-263-3457 or 206-915-0459.

Family Help Line: 1-800-932-HOPE or www.parenttrust.org. The Family Help Line is a free, statewide training and referral line for the families of Washington state. Last year, the Family Help Line received more than 5,000 calls and requests for information. Calls can last up to 90 minutes and parents can call as often as needed.

Support for foster parents under investigation for allegations of abuse or neglect: Foster Parent Investigation Retention Support Team (FIRST) 253-219-6782. Monday through Saturday, 8:00 a.m. – 8:00 p.m., or leave a message and receive a return call within 24 hours.

Foster Parent and Caregiver Crisis and Support Line: 1-800-301-1868

Mental Health Crisis Line Information: The crisis line telephone number for your county or region is available on the DSHS Mental Health Division website at: <http://www.dshs.wa.gov/mentalhealth/crisis.shtml>.

GENERAL FOSTER PARENT INFORMATION FOR THE STATE OF WASHINGTON

FPAWS: Foster Parent Association of Washington State, 1-800-391-CARE (2273) or www.fpaws.org. FPAWS is seeking new members and supporting foster parents in many ways, including referrals to local associations.

Kitsap and Pierce County information about becoming a foster parent or to receive foster parent support: Foster Care Resource Network, 253-473-9252. Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. or leave a message and receive a return call by the next business day.

RESOURCE INFORMATION AVAILABLE STATEWIDE

Get connected to information on resources in your area by calling 211 – a toll free number.

Children's Administration Foster Parent Website:

<http://www.dshs.wa.gov/ca/fosterparents/>

Children's Administration Foster Parent Training Website – Trainings are open to all licensed foster parents, licensed relative caregivers and unlicensed caregivers. For information about foster parent and caregiver training, check out:

<http://www.dshs.wa.gov/ca/fosterparents/training.asp>

CHILDREN'S ADMINISTRATION FOSTER CARE LISTSERV

Join the 2,200 people who have subscribed to the List Serve <http://listserv.wa.gov/cgi-bin/wa?SUBED1=fosterparents&&A=1> for updated information on resources for the work you do in caring for children.

Family Planning Services are designed to help avoid unwanted or mistimed pregnancy and are available through your local Community Service Office (CSO). Each CSO has a full time Family Planning Nurse to help provide services to Medicaid eligible clients. There is also a Family Planning hotline number 1-800-770-4334.

News from the Girl Scouts

Girl Scouts Fostering a Future (GSFF) is offered through Girl Scouts of Western Washington. This innovative program is for girls in foster care, kinship care, or those who have otherwise been involved with Child Protective Services.

The program is designed to address the instability, social and emotional needs faced by girls who have been removed from their homes due to traumatic incidents. Whether due to abuse and neglect or the incarceration of their primary caregiver these girls face unique situations and Girl Scouts has responded with opportunities that are not otherwise available.

GSFF is the only program in Western Washington that provides year-round support and critical life skills to girls in a group setting, with a consistent set of peers who share the out-of-home care experience. The program's success is linked to the following strategies:

- An opportunity to gain life skills with other girls in foster and kinship care. For many girls, this is the first social setting in which they do not feel the need to keep secret their family's circumstances.
- Age and developmentally appropriate activities designed to meet the specific needs of girls in foster and kinship care and strengthen positive assets. All girls learn boundaries, how to function as a group, and the self-confidence that supports their ability to get along better at home and at school, as well as within Girl Scouts. The younger girls focus on friendship, healthy habits, self-esteem, and conflict resolution. Teens prepare for independence through a life skills, financial literacy, and college readiness curriculum.
- The chance to develop a sense of belonging to the broader community through being a part of an organization that is an American tradition. Girl Scouts is a place where girls in foster and kinship care can give back, rather than just be cared for. The organizations they choose to provide service to may be those they know personally are making differences in the lives of other children and women in harm's way. Community service projects connect the girls to their community, help them to develop empathy for others and learn that they have the power to make a positive difference.

If you know a girl in grades K-12 who could benefit from this program contact Mecca Stevenson at mec-cays@girlscoutsww.org or 206-826-2156.

